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ABSTRACT

Study of college faculty has been hampered by the variation in types of institutions, the difficulty of obtaining an accurate faculty sample, and poor response rates to large-scale surveys. This document examines various approaches to conducting large-scale faculty surveys, and describes a suggested procedure to mitigate methodological problems. In developing the recommended procedure, six pilot tests were conducted to determine the feasibility of the methodology, the types of letters that should be sent, the person to whom these letters should be addressed, and the anticipated response rate. The pilot tests indicated that the college president is the best initial contact point, and that a high individual response rate could be achieved through the use of an on-campus facilitator. The procedures for sample selection and questionnaire administration are described, as is the application of the procedure to a nationwide survey of two-year college humanities instructors. The procedure described allows for cross-tabulations among respondents in various types of institutions while maintaining an accurate representation of the universe of institutions. (Author/NHM)

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MAXIMIZING RESPONSES TO A NATIONWIDE FACULTY SURVEY

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Study of college faculty has been limited by the variation in types of institutions, the difficulty of obtaining an accurate faculty sample, and the poor response rate in large-scale surveys. Institutional variation demands that accurate information can be obtained only if surveys are addressed to a broad sample of colleges. The population of institutions includes private, liberal arts-related colleges of fewer than 100 students, new, public occupational and technical institutes, multicampus comprehensive colleges of more than 30,000 students, and several other types in the various geographic regions. Before drawing inferences about faculty in colleges nationwide, the researcher must take care to assess instructors in all types of institutions in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole.

A representative sample of colleges can be drawn, but what of the faculty within them? Sending survey forms to a college in wholesale lots for distribution "to the faculty" is risky; the researcher never knows how or if they were distributed. And asking someone on the campus to "sample" a number of instructors is irresponsible, especially if the researcher needs a particular subgroup; the contact person may pick the first ten coming through the door. The researcher must undoubtedly address his questionnaires to specific instructors, but accurate faculty lists are not readily available because the colleges do not maintain faculty data uniformly. Even though the catalog typically provides names of full-time teaching faculty, it is usually out-of-date. More importantly, the part-time and

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adjunct faculty are usually not listed at all. Frequently employed at the last minute, their names may not be available until the term is under way.

A third problem--the difficulty in obtaining responses to surveys of large population--has been well-documented. A common--and very undesirable--practice is to mail out a huge number of questionnaires and accept a small proportion of returns. Numerous surveys reporting response rates as low as 20 to 30 percent are found in the literature. One can only speculate on the systematic biases among respondents in these samples.

Some investigators control for low rates of response by "forcing" answers from a small number on non-respondents and comparing them with the volitional responses. Others attempt to solve the problem by weighting the respondents within categories, thus leveling the returns. These and others that might be mentioned are legitimate statistical stratagems. However if nearly all the population sampled can be enticed to respond in the first place, the stratagems are rendered unnecessary.

How to get responses? Most of the techniques described in the literature are concerned with mailing procedures in which questionnaires are addressed to the recipients. Astin and Panos (1969) found that auto-typed letters sent special delivery produced a higher response cheaper in terms of cost per respondent (former students) than did registered mail, telephone calls, or mimeographed letters. Rossmann and Astin (1974) compared fourteen mailing techniques, each subtly different, and found that current and former college students were most efficiently surveyed using nonprofit outgoing postage, window envelopes, and business reply returns. The effects of offering cash rewards was noted by Dohrenwend (1970-1971) and Hackler and Bourgette (1973); of pre-contact with respondents by Walmsley (1973) and Parsons and Medford (1972); of length of questionnaire by Champion and Sear (1969).

The various procedures for increasing returns were summarized by Linsky (1975) whose survey of the literature found postcard reminders, pre-contact with respondents by telephone, type of postage, cash rewards, and the type of organization sponsoring the study all reportedly effective.

Those who survey college faculty similarly attend to the problem of obtaining reliable data. Some weight for non-respondents; the American Council on Education's national faculty survey (Bayer, 1973) obtained less than 50 percent returns and assigned categorical weightings to account for variation in response among such subgroups as doctoral degree holders, professors in large, research-oriented institutions, and so on. Others use intensive followup procedures; by so doing, Leslie received just under 70 percent returns from a sample of Pennsylvania faculty (1974) and an 86 percent return from a sample of 100 Pennsylvania community college instructors (1973).

Better returns seem always to be obtained if an on-site facilitator is there to deliver and retrieve the questionnaires--a technique employed frequently by survey research organizations such as National Opinion Research Center and Field Research Corporation. Indeed, in a survey of two-year college faculty members, Bushnell (1973) obtained a 90.9 percent response by having someone on each campus collect the forms. But his rate of return was severely inflated through his excluding from tabulation 24 of the 92 participating colleges because they returned fewer than 75 percent. In addition he allowed the on-campus facilitator to select his own sample within prescribed limits.

Charged with doing a nationwide survey of humanities instructors in two-year colleges for the National Endowment for the Humanities, we were led to develop and test a procedure for mitigating these problems.

The objectives of our investigation required a study group representative of both full- and part-time faculty members in the humanities and a comparison group of nonhumanities faculty. A further requirement was that the group be large enough to permit cross-classification of information by several variables simultaneously. A mailed questionnaire was the only method feasible within budget, but we felt it essential that representativeness be assured by following sound sampling principles and that reliability be maximized by obtaining a high rate of completed questionnaires.

We decided on a two-stage sample--a broad sample of colleges selected at random within certain strata, and a sample of the faculty within those colleges. The main stratification variables for the colleges would be type of control (public or private) and geographic locale because we felt these were the main institutional differences affecting the faculty. Secondary variables included college emphasis (comprehensive, technological, liberal arts), organization (multi- or single-campus district), size, and age.

In order to insure consistent definition of the population we decided to draw our own list of faculty members teaching humanities in these colleges. The National Endowment for the Humanities excludes the performing arts from its purview. Thus, we needed names of people teaching courses in Music Literature/Appreciation/History, but not those who taught performing music exclusively. Similarly we needed teachers in Art History and Appreciation, but not in Drawing, Sculpture, or Design. Theatre History and Appreciation were in; Stagecraft and Drama were out. Literature was in; Reading and Composition were out. We also needed an on-campus facilitator to send necessary materials to us and to distribute and retrieve the questionnaires so that we would not be faced with the typical low response rate obtained in individually mailed surveys.

Several pilot tests were conducted to determine the feasibility of the methodology, the types of letters that should be addressed, the pattern of interaction with the facilitators, and the responses we could anticipate. In one pilot test we sent the questionnaire to 29 faculty members selected at random from rosters in eight college catalogs. This procedure, including one follow-up letter, yielded a predictably low return rate of 31 percent.

Five additional pilot procedures were tried, each addressed to eight different colleges. Three of the pilots used different types of letters addressed to the president of the college, one was addressed to the dean of instruction, and in one we made a personal contact through phone or letter naming a mutual acquaintance. That is, in this latter procedure, we identified a person whom we knew and who also knew the president and who could be named as endorsing the project.

The pilot tests revealed that the president is the best initial contact point. The highest agreement to participate was obtained from the deans of instruction, but when we followed through with the distribution of the questionnaires through the deans, the lowest rate of returns was revealed. In the pilot tests when we went through the presidents, only approximately half of them agreed to have their colleges participate, but when they did, from 88 to 94 percent of the faculty returned the questionnaires. The lowest rate of return in this procedure was the one in which the personal contact was solicited through recommendations! Nevertheless the pilots did reveal that we could anticipate a high individual response rate through the use of an on-campus facilitator and that one-half or more of the colleges invited would participate.

The next step was to determine the size of the sample. The Endowment wanted 1,500 returns. Previous research had indicated that approximately

20 percent of the full-time instructors in two-year colleges teach in the humanities. We had no information on the part-timers, but we suspected a considerably lower number. Anticipating an 80 to 85 percent response, therefore, we needed to send out between 1,765 and 1,875 surveys. We also wanted a large enough sample of colleges--about 150--to maximize the spread by type of college within feasible limits.

The first stage in obtaining the sample of colleges consisted of drawing names from the 1975 Community, Junior, and Technical College Directory. Anticipating that about 60 percent of the presidents would acquiesce to our request to survey their faculty, we decided to invite 240 colleges initially. The 1,184 colleges in the Directory are arrayed alphabetically by the 50 states. Randomization by type of control and geographic locale was insured by starting at a random point and taking every fifth private and every fifth public college.

The second stage was to develop the sample of humanities instructors. The colleges listed in the Directory show a total of 162,000 faculty. Assuming our sample of 150 colleges--about 12-1/2 percent of the total--to be proportionate by size, we anticipated they would have 20,250 faculty (12-1/2 percent of the total). If 20 percent of the faculty were in the humanities, our colleges would yield a pool of 4,050 names. However, because we expected that fewer of the part-timers taught humanities we anticipated that the colleges in the sample would have between 3,500 and 3,750 humanities faculty members. Accordingly, we decided that a large enough pool could be generated by sampling one-half of the humanities instructors in each college.

We sent letters inviting participation, asking for the names of a contact person to act as facilitator, and asking that the facilitator

send a college catalog, a spring 1975 schedule of classes, and a faculty roster if one more up-to-date than the catalog listing were available. We needed the catalog because the course descriptions would tell us which courses properly fell within our purview. This proved useful in such areas as Anthropology where we wanted courses emphasizing Cultures of Man, but not those focused on Physical Anthropology. Similarly, a course entitled "Principles of Geography" would be included if it were described as a Cultural Geography course, but not if it emphasized scientific aspects. We needed the course schedule so that we could draw the names only of the people who were listed as teaching those courses in spring 1975. And we needed the faculty roster in order to check for first names and cross-check information such as departmental affiliation and chairperson status.

A roster of humanities faculty for each college was generated by listing all full-time and part-time instructors separately and picking a random one-half of each. In addition, we selected one-third as many department and division chairmen outside the humanities. Thus, if a college had a total of 20 full-time and four part-time instructors, we would sample ten of the full-timers, two of the part-timers, and four nonhumanities chairmen, yielding a total of 16 subjects for that college. This procedure demanded our reviewing every class schedule carefully, but we felt it essential to produce accurate rosters of people teaching one or more humanities courses in spring 1975.

We had developed a questionnaire including a large number of items arrayed in ten categories: demographic information; preservice preparation; preferences for curriculum and instruction; professional experiences; research orientation; concern for students; reference group identification; concern for the humanities; values; work satisfaction; and Functional Potential, a

hypothetical construct built on psychodynamic principles of human functioning. We had pretested it in several colleges in California and had asked numerous professional association heads and individual instructors in other parts of the country for suggestions. The final version totaled 11 printed pages.

After pulling the faculty sample for each college, we prepared packets for distribution by the facilitator. Each packet included a questionnaire, an envelope stamped "Confidential," and a larger envelope addressed to the facilitator with the faculty member's name on the outside. The facilitator gave a packet to each named instructor. The respondent was instructed to seal his questionnaire inside the confidential envelope, place it in the envelope addressed to the facilitator, and return it to him. The facilitator was instructed to check the respondent's name against the roster we had provided, remove the outer envelope, and return only the sealed inner-confidential envelope to us. In this way he could determine who had not responded. yet the instructor's anonymity of response was protected because the facilitator could not see the completed questionnaires themselves. After the facilitator had retrieved the questionnaires, he returned them to us. If any were still outstanding, we asked him to try to retrieve them. Contact with the facilitators was by both phone and letter. In no instance did we contact the respondents themselves.

One hundred fifty-six colleges, nearly exactly representative in terms of control, locale, size, age, emphasis, and organization, participated in the study. The anticipated 20 percent of full-time faculty members teaching humanities proved to be accurate. Of the part-time faculty in the colleges in our study, 10-1/2 percent taught in the humanities. The overall pool included 2,384 questionnaires sent; 2,008 were returned, including those

from the nonhumanities sample. Questionnaires were received from 100 percent of the faculty sampled in nearly two-thirds of the colleges. Overall, the response rate was 84 percent. Based on the checklists that were returned from the facilitators, we surmised that between four and five percent of the surveys were undeliverable because of inaccuracies in the schedules, last minute faculty substitutions, etc. Thus, we obtained a large pool of data with a minimal number of nonrespondents.

Although the procedure demands extreme care and rigor in selecting the samples and pursuing the returns, we feel it is essential if generalizations to the universe of faculty members are to be made. A response rate that finds only around ten percent of those receiving the questionnaires not returning them can be assumed to be an accurate representation of the population without weighting for respondent categories. And the stratification of colleges allows for cross-tabulations among respondents in various types of institutions while maintaining accurate representation of the universe of institutions.

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